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SUBJECT: NIGER: Ambassador Allen Hosts Political Parties

REF: Niamey 448

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador Allen hosted a series of dinners at the Chief of Mission Residence (CMR), June 4-30, inviting six of Niger's most influential political parties. These dinners allowed Embassy officials to meet political party leaders and gain insight into party perspectives on upcoming legislative and presidential elections and the deteriorating political landscape in Niger. Discussions were intense, direct, and broad in scope. While some of the parties supported President Tandja's plan for a constitutional referendum, the majority were against it, and believed that President Tandja was acting outside of the law. End summary.

Rally for Democracy and Progress - The People
RDP -Jama'a)

¶2. (SBU) The June 9 dinner at the CMR with RDP leaders came on the heels of President Tandja's May 26 decision to dissolve the National Assembly. When asked their opinion on recent political developments, the RDP leaders responded that they supported the idea of a constitutional referendum because they favor a presidential regime and believed that Article 141 of the current constitution, which provides amnesty for the perpetrators of the 1996 and 1999 military coups, should be excluded from any new text. Asked if they would support the referendum even if the amnesty were not removed, they responded that they would. The RDP leaders did say, however, that they were surprised and disappointed that President Tandja would seek a new constitution providing for a three-year "transition period" during which he would remain in power. They also stated that they were not in favor of organizing a referendum before holding legislative elections.

National Party for Democracy and Socialism - Unity (PNDS-Tarraya)

¶3. (SBU) At the June 16 dinner with the PNDS leadership, PNDS President Mahamadou Issoufou opened the dialogue by welcoming the statement issued by the State Department on May 29. This dinner came four days after the Constitutional Court issued its ruling that President Tandja's plan for a constitutional referendum was unconstitutional. Issoufou was very candid, providing intimate details about meetings he had held with President Tandja. Issoufou expressed his disappointment in President Tandja, citing meetings during which Tandja repeatedly assured him that he would not seek a third term. Issoufou admitted that he had been taken in by President Tandja's deception. He went on to say that in April 2009, Issoufou had encouraged President Tandja to step down at the end of his term in December, but that Tandja responded that he is the only person capable of ruling Niger.

14. (SBU) PNDS members condemned President Tandja's bid to remain in office and expressed a desire for a stronger condemnation by the international community, and said that they planned to devote more efforts in the future to relations with the US Government. Embassy officials sought clarification on the rationale for President Tandja's remaining in power. PNDS stated that Tandja had asserted that the "semi-presidential" regime provided for by the 1999 constitution is inadequate for Niger. Issoufou noted that this provision could be revised without changing the constitution in its entirety. PNDS believes Tandja has a weak argument. They noted that any group or voice contrary to Tandja's plans is excluded from the public media. It was abundantly clear that PNDS leaders firmly oppose President Tandja's plan to draft a new constitution and prolong his presidency.

Social Democratic Rally - Truth (RSD - Gaskiya)

15. (SBU) At the June 17 dinner, RSD leadership stated that they are a relatively new party, created a few weeks before local and general elections in Niger in 2004. Despite this obstacle, they were able to obtain seven seats in the National Assembly and several local council members throughout the country. For example, the RSD controls all three communes and the City of Maradi. RSD asserted that they are strong supporters of democratic principles, yet are in favor of a referendum to change the constitution. However, they were surprised to learn that President Tandja would like to extend his term in office by three years, as they find no justification for him to do so. Asked about the president's decision to have all National Assembly members repay the excess money that they had received prior to increased allowances were permitted by law, RSD President Cheiffou thought this made sense, but blamed the National Assembly President for presumably failing to inform parliamentarians that they had to stop receiving the extra payments.

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16. (SBU) One guest, however, a former Minister of Finance, disagreed and stated that the money had been budgeted and that responsibility fell on more than the parliamentarians. He noted that the Executive Branch approved the funding that had been requested and passed by the National Assembly, that the bill was signed subsequently by the Minister of Finance. In his view, it was not fair that the President use non-repayment of the funds by National Assembly members as grounds for dissolving parliament. According to him, the President's aim, one year after this dispute occurred, was to prevent those former members of parliament who oppose "Tazarce" (Note: Hausa language for "let it continue". End note.) from returning to the National Assembly.

Social Democratic Convention - Mercy and Prosperity (CDS-Rahama)

17. (SBU) At the June 19 dinner, CDS leadership was asked about for views regarding President Tandja's plans to remain in power. The CDS leaders were quick to remind the Embassy team that on May 14 the CDS had asserted the principles of their party - primarily that they abide by the constitution and that they would not support any move that would violate the constitution. Asked why the party had not made any subsequent public statements, CDS President Mahamane Ousmane stated that CDS did not need to issue a statement because the CDS is part of the ruling coalition and so would rather engage in direct dialogue with the President. Ousmane said, "we prefer to fight from within, rather than on the streets." (Comment: Many political observers, however, have stated they did not understand Ousmane's silence. End Comment.) Ousmane said that CDS would continue to disagree "within" the ruling coalition and take advantage of having direct contact with the President. He said he would try to convince President Tandja to abandon his project; if President Tandja persisted with the referendum, CDS would take another position. Regarding President Tandja's move to have the National Assembly members pay back unduly received allowance, Ousmane, who has been the National Assembly's Speaker until its dissolution on May 26, said that the President obviously intended to embarrass the Deputies, discredit them in the eyes of public opinion and attempt to disqualify them in the impending legislative elections.

¶18. (U) He lauded Voice of America (VOA) during the course of the dinner, notably for its broadcast in Hausa, stating that frequently in regions outside of Niamey, VOA may be the only unbiased news reporting the masses receive about political and other matters in Niger. He commented how the French final added a Hausa transmission only this past year, following the footsteps of the U.S., the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China.

National Movement for a Society of Development - Victory
(MNSD - Nassara)

¶19. (SBU) As a result of reported disorganization within the MNSD headquarters, a dinner originally scheduled for June 12 was postponed to June 23. A couple of members showed up on June 12, but as the MNSD had not confirmed attendance, no dinner preparations had been made for them. Ambassador offered them drinks and offered to host a dinner later in the month. (Note: While the other political parties sent their most senior leadership, the MNSD, which is the main party in the ruling coalition, sent a few die-hard MNSD members for the dinner. End note.) The MNSD strongly supports a presidential regime instead of the current "semi-presidential" one in order to provide full powers to the President. The President could then enact policy without the endorsement of the Prime Minister. (Note: Under the current system, the president serves as head of state and the prime minister as head of government. End note.) MNSD supports the President's actions, and in February held a convention to renew the parties' leadership after the motion of no confidence against the former Prime Minister, Hama Amadou (former MNSD party president).

¶10. (U) When asked whether the current schism within MNSD is harmful to the party, one dinner guest responded it was the MNSD leadership that decided to remove some names from the party rolls because it learned, after the Zinder convention in February 2008 that some MNSD members intended to undermine the party. In his view, the party was better off without the persons it "kicked out of the party." When asked whether former Prime Minister/party president Hama Amadou's new party, Lumana (Peace), would have an impact, the MNSD guests downplayed the creation of the new party as a non-event and opined it would not hurt the MNSD. Regarding President Tandja's June 20 decree announcing legislative elections on August 20, MNSD officials said that they were compiling their lists of candidates. They did not, however, discuss the referendum.

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Niger's Patriotic Movement - Youth (MPN - Matassa)

¶11. (SBU) The June 30 dinner with MPN leadership took place a day after President Tandja had dissolved the Constitutional Court, named eight new ministers, and had an opposition civil society group leader arrested for inciting security and military forces to disobey unlawful orders. Embassy officials gained helpful insights into the youth movement in Niger during the course of this dinner. MPN leaders clearly opposed President Tandja's bid to organize a constitutional referendum. They conveyed their fear that President Tandja would employ any means necessary to stay in power and was about to "cross the point of no return." This would include using traditional chiefs to muster sufficient votes to pass the referendum. MPN leaders are of the opinion that Tandja believes that potential sanctions by Western countries would be nullified by Chinese support. They noted that the MPN seeks to educate youth on its role in politics and encourage women to participate in politics. MPN, made of young, diplomaed entrepreneurs, has a slate of 58 candidates that will vie for seats in legislative elections slated for August 20.

Alliance for Democracy and Progress - Living in Peace (ANDP - Zaman Lahiya)

¶12. (U) The June 26 dinner scheduled with ANDP has been postponed to a date to be determined, as ANDP is still reorganizing after ANDP President Moumouni Djermakoye succumbed from a heart attack following an opposition rally on June 14 (reftel).

